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ABSTRACT

The role of the professional evaluator within a school district is essentially to provide data for use in informed decision making. In School District 4J in Eugene, Oregon, this role involves performing tasks in three basic categories: (1) maintaining and interpreting ongoing databases, (2) finding and analyzing information to answer specific administrative questions, and (3) assisting with the district's cycle of program evaluation. The ongoing databases, distinct from the district's mainframe computer records, provide information for enrollment projection, high school subject area enrollment trends, and longitudinal analysis of standardized test results. Requests for special-purpose information can lead to quick responses or require major reports. Typical requests have sought information on the potential impact of changes in graduation requirements, on predictors of the tendency to drop out of school, on the effects of an open enrollment policy, and on space utilization in an elementary school. The district's subject area programs are evaluated every 6 years, with the evaluator assisting in evaluation design and gathering and summarizing information for the subject area council. As purveyors of data, the evaluators collaborate with other educators in the evaluation process, promoting cooperative and productive decision making. (PGD)

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Databases and the Professional Evaluator

by

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A paper presented as part of the symposium

"Who evaluates school programs?"

at the annual meeting of the

American Educational Research Association

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This symposium was conceived during a late-night conversation at last year's AERA convention. The evaluation department from School District 4J, Eugene, Oregon (both of us) were talking about the day's events and how they related to our district. The conversation rambled, as such conversations do, ultimately leading us to the startling realization that research and evaluation in our district was a much broader undertaking than we had previously thought. Indeed, when we considered the many forms of evaluation, we realized that the role of the professional evaluator, at least in our district, had changed and evolved into something new. The purpose of this paper is to examine that role and to try to set a context for the remaining papers in this symposium.

The changing role of evaluation in District 4J has not yet developed to the point that it could be advanced as a full-fledged evaluation model, so I will not deliver a treatise proposing one. I will instead describe the duties of the evaluation staff, within a very broad conceptual framework. That framework is best described by three general principles –

1. The evaluator's chief function is to provide data for informed decision-making. This is not to imply that the evaluator's role is a purely passive one of gathering data and allowing others to make decisions. Indeed, it is often necessary to prod decision-makers to pay attention to data they are ignoring. The fundamental function of the evaluator, however, remains the same – purveyor of information within a decision-making team.

2. Information is useful only if the decision-makers understand it. Simplicity of analyses and clarity of writing are vital. Furthermore, information should not be restricted to quantitative data. Anecdotal data and qualitative information are often more easily understood and can be every bit as valid. Most important of all, data is less likely to be misunderstood if we have maintained clear and frank verbal communication with the users of our data.

3. Evaluation is more likely to lead to positive action if it is cooperative than if it is adversarial. Evaluation will be more successful if those affected by its results are

involved in the process. Evaluators are seen less as internal auditors and more as facilitators of self-examination and change.

The above framework has resulted in part from a reorganization of the chain of command in the district. Whereas the evaluation unit was formerly an independent department, it is now under the supervision of the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. It is conceivable that this might not always be an ideal arrangement, but in this case it is working well. In no way are the evaluators limited to instructional concerns, as we will see, nor are any constraints put on the manner in which we are free to report data. Most important, this arrangement has been central in promoting cooperation and communication between evaluation and instructional staff.

The evaluators' tasks can be classified into three broad categories –

1. maintaining and interpreting ongoing databases,
2. finding and analyzing information to answer specific administrative questions, and
3. assisting with the district's cycle of program evaluation.

Ongoing databases

There are two major types of databases with which we must deal – those housed in the district's mainframe computer records and those maintained by the evaluation department. The evaluation department is not responsible for mainframe computer records, nor do we have on-line access to them. These records enter into our work in many ways, but their maintenance can hardly be described as one of our tasks. The databases maintained by the evaluation department are a more direct concern.

Enrollment projection is a rather straightforward example of the application of one of our ongoing databases. The projections are made in October for the following year, with occasional revisions during the spring. They are the basis for staffing, scheduling, and some parts of revenue projection. Several years ago, a district employee wrote a

microcomputer program that would store five years' historical data and give the user the choice of five different projections of future enrollment. Once the total district projection is settled, individual school enrollments are estimated, using a slightly different database, namely, twenty years' worth of knowledge of the district. This method has been used with great success. Never has the overall projection differed from the actual district enrollment by more than half of one percent and seldom are more than a handful of schools misprojected by more than five percent.

Another database maintained by the evaluation department records high-school enrollments by subject area. The mainframe computer records have this information, but only for the current term. Furthermore, these records are awkward to use. For instance, there are three categories each for Science and Physical Education, but all Fine and Performing Arts, Industrial Arts, and Home Economics share a single category. For these reasons, we developed a database that shows subject-area enrollments in each high school going back to 1980-81. It shows some differences between schools, but more importantly, it shows a dramatic decline in elective credit in vocationally-related courses, a lesser decline in fine and performing arts, and increases in English, science, and foreign language credit. In most cases, these changes began at approximately the time that increased graduation requirements were first proposed or that the state university system proposed a change in entrance requirements. This database has allowed the district to avoid overprojecting effects of changing requirements when they actually come into effect. It has also raised concerns about the fate of the programs in decline.

The largest single ongoing task of the evaluation department is the annual standardized testing program. Although this could easily be considered a fourth category of task, I include it as an ongoing database. The primary use of test data in this district is for longitudinal comparisons. We discourage school-to-school comparisons of test data. Unfortunately, there is no system for computerized tracking of students' test scores, so

our test data may be seriously underutilized.

In addition to the databases maintained by the evaluation department and those housed on the mainframe computer, we regularly utilize Lane County's data system. This system includes demographic data, land-use data, and a mapping system. Annually we forward a computer tape of our complete student address file to the county, enabling them to provide us with maps of students' residences when needed (more of this later). Data from this system has also been used in long-range planning (e.g. school closings, sale of vacant buildings).

Specific requests for information

The second major category of task is to dig out and analyze information for specific purposes. These purposes vary from numerous small requests for information to a few major reports each year. The requests for information are intriguing and often require some ingenuity to fulfill. This category of task, while probably the most enjoyable, has its frustrations, either from data that cannot be verified or from seeing one's work being ignored in the final decision. These requests have one further advantage – they help to even out the evaluators' workloads. The major reports are seldom written on short timelines and can thus be left on the back burner, to be taken up again when time permits.

A typical study of this kind resulted from a proposal by a district committee to increase graduation requirements even beyond those imposed by the state. This proposal would also have eliminated Plan III, a local option whereby students can tailor their own graduation plans. We were asked to project the effects on students and schools of the new requirements. We drew a sample of one-quarter of the previous year's graduates and examined their transcripts. We discovered that, whereas the Plan III students had taken generally more rigorous academic programs, none of the sample would have met all of the new requirements. The staffing changes needed would have taken at least one-

quarter of the positions in elective subjects (including foreign language, a growing area) and reassigned them to required subjects. The proposal has already been modified, but is still officially on the table.

District 4J has very little information on its dropouts, so we conducted a study on dropouts from the class of '84. To identify the dropouts, we had to work in reverse. We compared the sophomore class lists from 1981-82 with the list of graduates from 1984, then tried to account for the remaining students. Those who were not still in our schools or could not be traced to another district or to the community college's high-school completion program, were considered to have dropped out. Three separate dropout rates were computed, based on three different definitions of dropout. A further analysis compared these students on several variables with a group that had graduated in 1984. The single strongest predictor of non-graduation in our variable set was Grade 9 attendance. This was no surprise, but the strength of this prediction was remarkable. A discriminant analysis using several variables (including absences, test scores and such family data as could be found) classified 78 percent of the two groups correctly, but a simple break at 10 absences in Grade 9 would have classified 68 percent of each group correctly. That is, two-thirds of the graduates had 10 absences or fewer; two-thirds of the dropouts had more than 10.

Two other examples indicate the resourcefulness that these information requests bring out. District 4J has an open enrollment policy which allows any student to enroll in any school in which there is room, provided they have an administrative transfer. Such transfers are routinely given. Allegations of abuses of this system resulted in a request to assess the effects of the policy. The county's mapping system gave us lists of students not attending their "home" schools, but this was not enough. The writer had to try to verify that those attending their "home" school actually lived where they claimed to live. The county mapped the given addresses of students at each high school. Aside from one student having an address at a university dormitory and another allegedly

living in a church parking lot, this method turned up very little. We finally tried cross-matching students' given addresses to those listed in the telephone directory, but found very few anomalies.

In another case, several elementary schools complained of overcrowding and the call went out to us to assess the severity of the situation. Building plans and a ten-year-old report on school capacity convinced us that the problem was not a lack of space, but simply too many rooms being dedicated to special uses.

The cycle of program evaluation

The final category of tasks is to assist with the ongoing cycle of program evaluation. In this district, all subject areas are on a six-year evaluation cycle. In those subjects with district-adopted textbooks, the evaluations precede textbook adoption by one year. The evaluations themselves are planned by the subject-area councils, who also are responsible for the final evaluation reports. Each council consists of teachers, building administrators, and one central-office administrator. The role of the professional evaluator in this evaluation cycle is twofold – to assist with the design of the evaluation and to gather and summarize information requested by the council.

A loosely- constructed outline termed the APE (All-Purpose Evaluator) is often used to give the council a start in defining the issues of the evaluation. The APE outlines four possible areas on which the council may wish to focus –

1. Goal Verification. If goals have not been re-examined recently, this should be the starting point. In District 4J, all subject councils have recently written official position papers, so goal verification has not been an issue in recent evaluations.

2. Program Description. In several programs, there is little baseline data for comparisons. A detailed description of the current program will become baseline data for the next evaluation cycle.

3. Implementation Verification. The one issue that the subject councils most want to

address is, "How well does the actual program match that which appears on paper?" The questions asked here require much of the same data as program description, but involve comparisons to the standard spelled out in district documents.

4. Assessment of Student Outcomes. In some subjects, such as Language Arts, there is ample data on student outcomes. In others, very little data exists. Unfortunately, those tend to be the subjects in which there are very few instruments to assess student outcomes.

Once the council has discussed the APE and set its priorities, evaluation staff collect and summarize data for the final report. Quantitative data is not the only type included, of course. In the evaluation of art, social studies, and music programs, for instance, directed interviews with administrators and group discussions with teachers figured strongly. These directed discussions followed a set pattern. A list of questions for discussion was circulated ahead of time to the personnel involved. The group discussions were conducted with a tape recorder running (after all present had consented) so that the interviewer would be free to participate in the discussion rather than take notes. The tape was later summarized in the relative quiet of the office.

This approach to program evaluation, probably more than anything else, has contributed to the atmosphere of cooperation which I mentioned as the third point of the conceptual framework for our role. Teachers and administrators are realistic and blunt about the shortcomings of their programs. If the criticisms have come from them in the first place, they are overjoyed to see someone in central office take note. I doubt if they would be so excited were we to advance these criticisms on our own.

Conclusion

The title of this symposium asks the question, "Who evaluates school programs?" As I indicated at the outset, this paper was not intended to advance a model for the role of the professional evaluator, but simply to describe that role as it exists in one school district.

The persons called "professional evaluators" are only a part of the evaluation picture. We are the voices that keeps saying, "Data, not dogma." We are the purveyors of data, but we are not **THE EVALUATORS**. That role is shared. The remaining papers in this symposium will describe some of the other faces of research and evaluation in District 4J. It is my belief that the studies they present share the conceptual framework I outlined – that data should be used for informed decision-making, that results must be understandable, and that a cooperative atmosphere is the most productive one.